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SUBJECT: President Affirms Commitment to Negotiated
Settlement and Cease-fire

REFS: (A) COLOMBO 1916 (B) COLOMBO 1917

(U) CLASSIFIED BY CHARGE' D'AFFAIRES JAMES F. ENTWISTLE.
REASONS 1.5 (b, d).

11. (C) Summary. President Kumaratunga called in the Charge' November 5 to clarify her actions. She said she is committed to maintaining the ceasefire with the LTTE and to reaching a "negotiated settlement" with the Tigers. She wishes the Prime Minister success in this regard but felt she had no choice but to take over the Defense and Interior portfolios after what she sees as a two-year history of the LTTE being allowed to "run wild." She told the Charge' that her imposition of a state of emergency is a preemptive action to be used in case the Prime Minister's supporters take to the streets. The Charge' told the President that the U.S. is paying close attention to the safety and security of American citizens. The President assured the Charge' that American citizens should go about their business and should not change travel plans. In particular, she said U.S. military cooperation activities already under way should continue. The President seemed self-confident and composed but unable to avoid veering into lengthy historical accounts of the Prime Minister's alleged perfidy over the years. This clearly is personal. End Summary.

12. (C) President Chandrika Bandanaraike Kumaratunga called in the Charge' late on November 5. With her foreign affairs advisor Lakshman Kadirgamar sitting in, the President told the Charge' that she wanted to make sure that Washington got the "full story" on the actions she had taken to "ensure the integrity of the nation," especially in light of the "lies" that are being spread against her.

13. (C) The President said that she had originally intended to keep the defense portfolio, as Presidents historically have. PM Wickremasinghe had "whined so much" about how he needed to put his own defense minister in to move forward on the peace process that "I gave it to him and have regretted it ever since." The President then went through an exhaustive review of various "failings" by the Prime Minister in his dealings with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in particular, according to her, repeated instances in which he had turned a "blind eye" to the Tigers efforts to rearm and re-equip, in order to not damage the "peace process." The President said she had had enough and, after the latest flap with General Tellefsen, the head of the Scandinavian monitoring mission, and after two years of "being ignored" by the PM on defense matters, decided that she had to act to take back control. The President stressed her commitment to a "negotiated settlement" ("I like that term better than 'peace process.'") but said the PM's efforts had allowed the LTTE to "run wild" since "they realized that Ranil would allow anything to keep the peace process going." "I will be gently firm with the Tigers but they can't be allowed to dance a jig whenever they want."

14. (C) In the same vein, the President said, she had taken over the Interior Ministry to ensure that the police function (which historically had resided in Defense, according to her) would also be used "for the benefit of the nation." It had been necessary to take back the Mass Communications Ministry in order to ensure that the "PM's boys don't twist things." Asked why she had taken back the Finance Ministry (which had been "confirmed" to us shortly before the meeting), President Kumaratunga looked at the Charge' blankly and said she had done no such thing and had never even considered it.

15. (C) Turning to the suspension of Parliament, the President said that was necessary to "let things cool down" for two weeks and allow people to adjust to the steps she had taken. She acknowledged that the suspension would delay the budget debate by a week, but she said that was not a significant consideration in light of the other "grave matters" facing the country.

16. (C) Asked about the state of emergency, the President said this was a preemptive action so that the military would have the necessary powers in hand in case the Prime Minister's party loyalists tried to take to the streets.

She asked that Washington be informed that she is not imposing a "state of siege" and that the "jackboots are not marching down the street." "I fervently hope I will not have to use any emergency powers." Rumors to the contrary, she said, no curfew has been imposed.

17. (C) The Charge' told the President that the primary concern in Washington was whether her actions were intended to scuttle the peace process at a key, delicate moment. The President said that nothing could be further from the truth. The Charge' also told the President that the U.S. was following the situation on the ground very closely in terms of the security and safety of American citizens. So far, we see no cause for alarm but we would continue to pay close attention, especially now that terms like "state of emergency" were in play. In particular, he noted, the U.S. by coincidence had a number of military cooperation activities under way. We intended to continue with these unless the situation became unsafe or we were told to stand down. The President said that safety and security were her highest priorities. She asked that Washington be informed that the "situation on the streets" is fine and that there is no reason that Americans should not continue to go about their business and to travel to Sri Lanka as planned. The President said she plans to "address the nation in greater detail" on November 6 and would underline those points in those remarks. She also noted that, "as the new Defense Minister," she was very pleased to hear about ongoing military cooperation activities and that these should proceed as planned.

18. (C) In conclusion, the President asked that the Charge' convey the following points to Washington:

--she is well aware of and grateful for the positive role the U.S. is playing in trying to end the conflict in Sri Lanka. She asked that her warm regards be conveyed to President Bush and said she hoped to meet him soon.

--she is fully committed to maintaining the cease-fire agreement with the LTTE.

--she has no intention of "chasing out" the Norwegians from their facilitation role or the Scandinavian monitors from their "important work."

--"My commitment to a negotiated settlement is unwavering."

19. (C) Comment. The President appeared self-confident and composed (as did her pet dog which wandered in and out of the room). That said, she constantly detoured into long, angry rants against the Prime Minister for his alleged personal slights and insults over the years and historical accounts of the myriad ways in which the PM has "betrayed" the country. This is clearly a strongly felt personal issue for her although she seemed sincere when she spoke about how she is acting in the interests of the country. The President listened closely as the Charge' outlined the U.S. concern for the peace process and for the welfare of U.S. citizens. We will see what she says to the public tomorrow but she is clearly determined and hunkered down for a long haul. End Comment.

110. (U) Minimize considered.

ENTWISTLE